

Kim Jong un Looks Up at the Sky: Another North Korean Threat or a Sunshine from the Milky Way?

by Pier Luigi Zanatta

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In the last two decades the West has learned only too well that dealing with North Korea is no trifle. But 2012 could be the year for a crucial divide; it marks not only the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, but also the 20th anniversary of the first joint North-South declaration on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The two events seem somehow in contrast since Pyongyang preannounced in mid-March the launch of a satellite next month to commemorate the founder of the ruling communist dynasty, the grandfather of the newly enthroned Kim Jong Un.

The satellite announcement can be interpreted either as a new threat of developing more powerful missiles or as a proof of clean hands in a space drive that foreign experts have been invited for the first time to witness as guests at the launch (which is significantly planned on the western and not on the eastern coast). Actually there are plenty of reasons to put caution first in assessing North Korean attitudes: for 20 years a pile of diplomatic initiatives and bulky documents have been testifying how hard it can be to ditch the last hotbed of the Cold War. But Korea is known as the “Land of Dawn” and these days there is also some hope of diplomatic sunshine, which has sprung with the magic of music. It is a symphonic orchestra which brought its charm to Paris on March 14 under the baton of Chung Myung-whun, the South Korean conductor who settled in Europe in 1984. He traveled to North Korea last year, after France opened a cultural office in Pyongyang, and organized the unprecedented trip abroad for the local musicians, 75 young players whose unexpected mastery has conquered even the most sophisticated Parisian boffins.

Together with their colleagues of the Radio France Philharmonic, the Korean musicians excelled in playing not only some traditional tunes, but also Brahms’ 1st symphony and a violin concerto by Camille Saint-Saens. The name of the orchestra, founded just three years ago, is Unhasu (which means Milky Way); till now they had performed only at home with a string of “revolutionary tunes,” including a few Russian and Chinese songs. Most probably the orchestra was set up as a response to the visit made in North Korea in 2008 by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Lorin Maazel, who also toured Seoul. That was the last glow of the Sunshine Policy, the “smiling diplomacy” toward the North initiated in 1998 by the late South Korean president, Kim Dae-jung, and continued by his successor Roh Moo-hyun, but then abandoned by the incumbent Lee Myung-bak, whose mandate expires at the end of this year.

The political meaning of Unhasu’s trip has been underscored by some other encouraging signs. The North Korean representative to the Six-Party Talks Ri Yong Ho and his South Korean counterpart Lim Sung-nam met informally at an academic forum in New York earlier this month, while envoys from Washington and Pyongyang resumed talks in Beijing about the American food assistance suspended three years ago. That’s to reciprocate the hopeful start of a new round of strategic negotiations that US and North Korean representatives are having in China after Pyongyang showed a new willingness to stop its uranium enriching activities and to accept IAEA inspections.

It’s all déjà vu. But it’s a première under the new leader of the last Stalinist stronghold in the world, the Swiss-educated Kim Jong-un. Since December he has managed to succeed quite smoothly his late father Kim Jong Il, and now he seems to have put an important stake on “musical diplomacy.” Shortly before leaving for France, the Unhasu had a triumphant performance in Pyongyang and Kim Jong Un went personally to cheer the orchestra, accompanied by a large group of dignitaries. Among them, his “political tutors” Choe Thae Bok and Jang Song Thae (one being his father’s most trusted international advisor, the other his maternal uncle), the army boss Ri Yong Ho and the top officials in charge of the relations with South Korea and the US, Kim Ki Nam and Kang Sok Ju.

Far from the hierarchy of the regime, observers have recently spotted also other interesting signals at some grassroots levels. Officials seem now to speak a bit more freely than during the Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il era and restaurants owned by North Korean state companies have started to open their doors abroad; not only in China but also in Thailand, Cambodia and as far as Dubai and Amsterdam (the first such restaurant in the West, set up with the cooperation of two local entrepreneurs). It sounds all pretty different from the past, like the Stradivarius violin that has been exhibited at the concert in Paris by the soloist of Unhasu, the flamboyant Mun Kyong Jin. No wonder that now director Chung (who was born in South Korea by a North Korean mother) is looking forward to go back to Pyongyang as soon as possible; he wants to play with his French orchestra and with other North Korean musicians, maybe also in events organized with South Korean colleagues (and that would be another première).

As a famed artist, maestro Chung is definitely entitled to be so enthusiastic, but political analysts prefer to keep a less impatient attitude. Many a delicate balance hinge on the 38th parallel since the second World War. Even China, which has been a traditional defender of Pyongyang in the international arena, could be taken aback now by any quick shift in traditional postures and alignments. Beijing is wading through a leadership transition that might prove more toilsome than

expected, while its relations with the West seem under growing strain on different levels. Japan too is confronting a complicated political and economic situation, while the Russian leadership is just emerging from a limited but significant electoral challenge. All these countries have their say in the Six-Party Talks on North Korean disarmament, which have been in the doldrums for three years but could restart soon and become the real litmus test for Pyongyang's intentions and goodwill.

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